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God's Bits of Wood

1960

Excerpt

Author's Note

The men and women who, from the tenth of October, 1947, to the nineteenth of March, 1948, took part in this struggle for a better way of life owe nothing to anyone: neither to any 'civilizing mission' nor to any parliament or parliamentarian. Their example is not in vain. Since then, Africa has made progress.

Bamako

Ad'jibid'ji

The last rays of the sun filtered through a shredded lacework of clouds. To the west, waves of mist spun slowly away, and at the very center of the vast mauve and indigo arch of sky the great crimson orb grew steadily larger. The roofs, the thorny minarets of the mosques, the trees – silk-cotton, flame, and mahogany – the walls, the ochered ground; all caught fire. Striking brutally through the cloud curtain, like a beam from some celestial projector, a single ray of light lashed at the Koulouba, the governor's residence, poised like a sugar castle on the heights that bore its name.

At the centre of the belt of hills the groups of mud-walled houses and the dry grass, still scorched by the heat of noon, now swam in the red waters of the setting sun. A dry breeze from the northeast moved against the faces of the people, but they still sweated a little.

It was an afternoon in mid-October, at the end of the season of rains, and as was the custom at this time of day the women of the Bakayoko house were gathered in the courtyard. Only the women. As they went about their household tasks they chatted constantly, each of them completely indifferent to what the others were saying. Seated a little apart, with her back against the hard, clay wall, was old Niakoro.

Niakoro was very old indeed. On either side of her little, high-arched nose the drooping lids half covered her eyes. Her lips were tattooed – a souvenir of youthful vanity. The line of her mouth was drawn back in a perpetual sucking motion, and her cheeks moved in and out to the rhythm of her breathing, so that she seemed always to be swallowing. Her head appeared linked to her body only by threads of flesh, and by the flabby dewlaps that drooped beneath her chin. And yet this ancient countenance had the serenity that comes to those who arrive at the end of a hard and virtuous life. From beneath an old and faded cloth, which came only to her thighs, her crooked legs stuck out, and feet with toes widespaced and bent.

Old Niakoro was only half listening to the wives of the absent men. She seemed, rather, to be watching over them, like a shepherd not far distant from his flock. Only rarely did she take part in their gossiping; except, occasionally, to tell them a story of times when they were not yet born. But for some days now she had been worried. A serious thing had occupied her mind, and more serious than the thing itself was the fact that no one had noticed her suffering. It was this that disturbed and haunted her. In her time the young people undertook nothing without the advice of their elders, but now, alone, they were deciding on a strike. Did they even know what would happen? She, Niakoro, knew; she had seen one. A terrible strike, a savage memory for those who had lived through it; just one season of rains before the war. It had taken a husband and a son from her, but now no one even came to seek her advice. Were the ways of the old time gone forever? Ibrahim Bakayoko, her own son, had told her nothing!

At the time of that first strike it was true that she had been living in the west, in the country of the *toubabous dyions* – the slaves of the Europeans. She had been told enough about this Sénégal, about the work to be found there, the fortunes to be made, but she had brought back only mourning and sorrow. Since then she had called the Senegalese ‘the slaves’, and when she spoke of her younger son she said, ‘He seems like one of the Ouolof people, one of the westerners; he has the bearing, and the manners.’

‘But no,’ Niakoro thought, sucking at her cheeks, ‘I want to hear no more of those people. Slaves, and sons of slaves, they are nothing but liars – will the Bambaras never learn that? The Bambaras have never run before an enemy; we speak honestly, and we do as we say we will do. And now these brainless workers on the trains want another strike, and it will be the Sudanese that are killed, just as it was the last time!

‘What was the name of that one who came two weeks ago? I knew his father; he was a good Ouolof. He came to see Ibrahim. They know the Bambaras, the men of Ibrahim Bakayoko; even the white men know the Bambaras. And Ibrahim, my son – everyone knows my son. Ever since his father’s death he has never been content to stay in one place. He was restless even when I still carried him, but then it gave me pleasure. And now he is preaching a strike – why? It is dangerous, and I would feel better about it if the westerners were not involved. I don’t trust them. They are all liars and cheats.’

Weary with thinking, weary of all these memories whispering in her skull, Niakoro lifted her head to look at the women, seated now along the wall of the enclosure, trying to escape the sun. In the middle of the courtyard stood the little platform used for drying seeds. Bunches of red.....

....impudent. On the contrary, her maturity, her quickness, and her intelligence astounded everyone – and Nyakoro worst of all.

She passed the book from one hand into the other and asked respectfully, “May I go, Grandmother?”

‘But don’t you know that today is the day of the big meeting, on the strike?’

‘Yes.’

‘You have never seen a strike! Your “little father” saw one, when he was still a child. Soldiers will come, and there will be shooting. And you – in the middle of the men you will be like a sheep in a stampede of camels. Are you not afraid?’

‘Of what, Grandmother?’

‘Of what? You ask of what? But what do you have in your head?’

‘Thoughts, Grandmother, nothing but thoughts.’ Ad’jibid’ji’s hands were clasped behind her back, and she was balancing carefully, first on one foot, and then the other. Her slight body seemed almost lost in the cotton dress that was much too big for her.

For an instant the old scarred lips formed an incredulous O, without making a sound. Then Niakoro said sarcastically, ‘You don’t even know how to prepare a *couscous*. That’s what comes of always hanging about with the men, instead of staying beside your mother, where you belong.’

The last phrase stung the child to the quick. ‘This morning I went to the river alone to do the washing,’ she stammered, ‘and then I went to the market. For three days we have been grinding, and I was always there. And tonight I cleaned up from the meal. *Alors?*’

Ad’jibid’ji had spoken the last word in French.

‘*Aloss, aloss!*’ her grandmother screamed, as if trying to wrench the words from the child’s lips. ‘You speak to me, to your father’s mother, and you say “*aloss*”! The white men say “*aloss*” when they call their dogs, and my granddaughter talks to me in the same way!’

Old Niakoro had never spoken to a white man, but for some reason this word had always grated on her ears. Without knowing why she thought it vulgar, and in the mouth of a child who should have lowered her voice when she spoke to her, it was sores than that.

‘*Aloss, aloss,*’ she repeated. ‘I speak to you in Bambara, and you answer me in a language of savages!’

‘The word just came out, Grandmother.’

Ad’jibid’ji was honestly confused. She didn’t mean to hurt the old woman. She glanced over toward her mother, and tears flowed from the almond ovals of her eyes. The knowledge of her fault upset her, but even as she thought about it she wanted to cry out that she was free and independent. She wished she might explain that word – independence.

As for Niakoro, she was more stunned than hurt. She could not understand how the child could be unaffected by what she had said. And as Ad’jibid’ji continued to cry, the other women ceased their gossiping.

‘Ad’jibid’ji,’ Assitan exclaimed, ‘your father forbade you to used that word!’

‘I know, Mother, I know. But I didn’t do it on purpose.’

‘Go bring me the *nguégué*,’ Assitan said, putting down her fan.

As moment later the child came back, carrying a whip. Assitan took it from her hands. Ad’jibid’ji regarded her mother gravely, and before turning around she asked, ‘Is it to hurt me, Mother, or to make me better?’

The uplifted arm remained motionless.

The education she had received from her *petit père* had made Ad’jibid’ji a precocious child, and she had learned very quickly to make a distinction among punishments. If she knew she was at fault she withstood the most severe correction with a disarming, almost impersonal attitude, and there were even times when she could be heard talking to herself about her mistakes.

Dumbfounded, Assitan stared at the naked little bottom and then reached out and dropped the cotton dress, as if she were lowering a curtain. She adored Ad’jibid’ji, as did all of her neighbours, and could find nothing to complain of in the child. She

helped with the work of the house, and she ran the errands, but there were moments, such as this, when Assitan would have preferred to have had a son.

‘Go over there in the corner,’ she said.

Head bowed, the child went to the opposite corner of the courtyard, and after a little while the women appeared to have forgotten the incident. It was Fatoumata, the woman with the man’s voice, who found a means of freeing Ad’jibid’ji.

‘Go and look for Fa Keïta,’ she said, ‘and tell him to give me some money. I asked him for it already.’

‘May I go, Mother?’

‘Yes,’ Assitan replied, shaking her head.

Walking very slowly, Ad’jibid’ji left the house. In her corner, old Niakoro was sleeping, or pretending to sleep.



The building occupied by the union was just next door to the prison. Low and solidly built of hard clay, it was surrounded by a thick mud wall the height of a man’s head. For some days now it had been a beehive of activity, with workers from all of the locals arriving or departing, and with men from every corner of the district coming in search of news. But on this day, from one hour to the next, ever since dawn, the crowd had grown constantly larger. The trainmen were going to call a strike, and each man knew that such a decision would involve them all. Inside the courtyard some squatted on their heels, while others remained standing, or leaned against the wall. There were men in the branches of the trees, and sitting astride the wall. Swiftly, the courtyard had become too small, and the mass of bodies now pressed against the gate of the prison and overflowed into the fields. Everyone was waiting for the speaker who had been announced.

As soon as she was in the street, Ad’jibid’ji gathered up the long skirt and began to run, her feet stirring little clouds of dust at every step. She crossed the Kati road, passing the police barracks, and when she reached the prison a militiaman who recognised her called out to her, but she paid no attention. Soldiers, looking like watchdogs, with their weapons beside them, and militiamen in leggings and khaki shirts and shorts, with heavy whips in their hands, were there to keep an eye on the workers.

Once she had passed the prison, Ad'jibid'ji collided with the mob that surrounded the union building, but she was accustomed to this sort of thing and had perfected a means of getting through. She would thrust her hands, and then her head, between the bodies of the men, look up at them, and mummer '*Pardon*', and slip by. Everyone knew her; they called her the *soungoutou* of the union – their 'little daughter' – and as soon as she had passed on, the crowd closed in behind her. As she made her way forward she could hear snatches of the speech of Fa Keïta, who was talking about wages and the cost of living. Someone in the crowd, whom she had disturbed, cried 'Shhh', and the sound was taken up by the others. For a moment Ad'jibid'ji waited and then began her little game again: a timid upward glance, a little smile, a coaxing wink of the eye, and once again she slipped through. In this manner she finally reached the door.

On either side of a central aisle the crowd before her pressed solidly up to the foot of the stage – a collection of bodies and heads, of shaven skulls and woolly ones, of rags blackened by axle grease. The faces seemed to have lost all trace of personality. As if some giant eraser had rubbed out their individual traits they had taken on a common mask, the anonymous mask of a crowd. The hall was ventilated by four windows, but tonight these were serving as seats or as resting places for the audience. A heavy odor of sweat and of stale fog rose like a fog.

On the wall behind the stage hung a large banner:

TREAT AS A FRIEND WHO TREATS YOU AS A FRIEND
TREAT YOUR MASTER AS AN ENEMY

Stepping over the legs of the seated men, and pushing between their shoulders, Ad'jibid'ji made her way to the foot of the stage and sat down on the hard-packed ground, between two men. From time to time she sniffed and glanced disgustedly at the man on her right, whose filthy, sore-covered feet gave out a fetid odor. But he was too preoccupied with the words of the Old One to pay any attention to the child.

Mamadou Keïta, or the Old One, as he was respectfully known, was standing at the left of the stage. A sleeveless tunic revealed his long, emaciated arms. The narrow, angular head perched above his meagre body was entirely shaved, except for a sparse white beard of which he was fiercely proud. He spoke slowly, but precisely, evoking the laying of the first rails. At that time he had not yet been born, but later he had seen the completion of the railroad at Koulikoro. Then he spoke of the epidemics, of the famines, and of the seizure of the tribal lands by the company.

Mamadou Keïta paused, and his bloodshot, deep brown eyes studied the crowd thoughtfully. From his forehead three ritual scars ran down to his chin, crossed at intervals by little horizontal gashes. He saw Ad'jibid'ji and began to speak again.

'It is true that we have our trade, but it does not bring us what it should. We are being robbed. Our wages are so low that there is no longer any difference between ourselves and the animals. Years ago the men of Thiès went out on strike, and that was only settled by deaths, by deaths on our side. And now it begins again. At this very moment meetings like this one are taking place from Koulikoro to Dakar. Men have come to this same platform before me, and other men will follow. Are you ready to call a strike – yes or no? Before you do, you must think.'

From the hall Tiémoko interrupted him.

'We're the ones who do the work,' he roared, 'the same work the white men do. Why then should they be paid more? Because they are white? And when they are sick, why should they be taken care of while we and our families are left to starve? Because we are black? In what way is a white child better than a black child? In what way is a white worker better than a black worker? They tell us we have the same rights, but it is a lie, nothing but a lie! Only the engines we run tell the truth – and they don't know the difference between a white man and a black. It does no good just to look at our pay slips and say that our wages are too small. If we want to live decently we must fight!

All through the hall clenched fists were raised, and voices cried out, 'Yes, we must strike! Strike!' Everyone wanted to present his evidence, to give his opinion, and the din became indescribable.

Tiémoko, who had interrupted the Old One, got up from his seat, his brutish head thrust forward. He was a thirty-year-old colossus with a thick-muscled body, enormous shoulders, and a bull neck on which the veins pulsed angrily. From his left ear hung a heavy ring of twisted gold. His yellow undershirt was soaked with sweat.

Disconcerted by the tumult he had unleashed, Mamadou Keïta waited silently, but the disorder only increased. In the deepening uproar the hall seemed suddenly smaller. It was no longer possible to hear anyone; there was just a clamor of voices. A sickly-looking youth, arguing with someone, tried to climb up on a bench, but it collapsed and crashed against the shins of the men around him. Almost immediately, six, eight, ten voices began to curse, and angry cries and oaths filled the air. Outside, the crowd was growing restless, too, and a vague, rumbling sound poured in through the door and the windows. Through it all, one word could be heard, endlessly repeated: 'Strike!'

In the street, the militiamen fidgeted with their whips, and the soldiers adjusted their weapons. The officers surveyed the excited mob uneasily.

Ad'jibid'ji took advantage of the confusion to climb up on the stage with the Old One. She gave him Fatouma's message, and he told her to stand against the wall at the back, beneath the banner. She was taking in the noisy spectacle with more interest than amusement, when suddenly a little smile lit up her face. The memory of a story Ibrahim Bakayoko had told her raced through her mind. 'In the days before we had the union the men used to sit on the ground, in the middle of a discussion, and demand that we give them benches. We gave them benches, and what happened? When they wanted to argue they all stood up, as if the benches weren't even there!' Remembering, Ad'jibid'ji suppressed a laugh.

On the stage the officials murmured among themselves, and several times Keïta called for silence. Little by little the uproar died down, and the men began to take their places again. When someone refused to sit down, the others pulled him by the tunic, or pushed him down by the shoulders. Diara, the ticket collector on the railroad, was trying to worm his way into a better place and had managed, by adroit manoeuvring, to move up several rows before he got an elbow in his belly and fell down.....

...knowledge is not a hereditary thing. For months I have been learning that – and with regret, believe me.'

'Vai! Lies! Whatever a child knows a grown person knows better.'

'You do not work, Niakoro. You do not know that there are all sorts of new machines – and I do not know them either. But tomorrow, tomorrow, Niakoro – what do you know of tomorrow? Sat the union building, just now, if I had spoken they would have thrown me out.'

'And your white hairs? Of what use are they then?'

'Do not confuse respect with knowledge. Do you remember the old saying – "Before one has white hairs, one must first have them black"?''

'Bah,' old Niakoro said and relapsed again into silence.

When he had finished eating, Mamadou Keïta washed his hands and rendered thanks to Allah. He gave a portion of his cola nut to Niakoro and then said to Ad'jibid'ji, 'Child, you do not like Tiémoko?'

‘No, Grandfather, I do not like him.’

‘Why?’

‘What can I say to him?’ the child thought, as she washed her hands. ‘How can I explain that to me he is a bully; that I didn’t like the way he spoke, that even though he is a friend of father’s...’

‘I just don’t know, Grandfather.’

‘And yet, he gets along well with your father, and you like to hear him sing.’

I do like his voice, the child said, hoping to cut off these questions. ‘I would like to go to bed, Grandfather. Grandmother, I would like to go to bed.’

‘Go and pass the night in peace, and may you live to be older than your grandmother.’

‘May everyone pass the night in peace.’

Ad’jibid’ji disappeared down the corridor, and the old people were left alone with their thoughts and their fears. The night no longer brought them rest. At the moment the eyes of the body closed, the eyes of the mind were opened. On the threshold of every dwelling place, people listened fearfully to the distant rhythm of the dance. In the darkness that enclosed the city the deep-toned drumming seemed now to come from everywhere at once, twisting and turning through the heads of those to whom sleep would not come.

The above extract from the beginning of the book have been copied from Google Books at:

<http://www.amazon.com/Gods-Bits-Wood-Sembene-Ousmane/dp/0435909592>

Google Books does not give a continuous read of this work, but this extract does give some idea of the flavour of the book. The extract is only a small part of what is available at the above Google books link.

There is a Wikipedia entry on the book at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God's_Bits_of_Wood

A study guide can be found at <http://www.bookrags.com/God's Bits of Wood>

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